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# Searle's Collective Intentionality: A Defence

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**Abstract:** This paper concerns social ontology. At the heart of the discussion of social ontology are *institutional facts*. These are indispensable to sustain harmoniously in a society. The focal point of this paper is *collective intentionality* or *we-intentionality* that is used to create institutional facts. It is one of the building blocks in the creation of institutional facts. There is a debate within the social ontological arena whether the collective intentionality can or cannot be reduced to individual intentionality. Primarily, I will deal with this debate. John Searle has opposed such a reduction but thinkers like Raimo Tuomela and Kaarlo Miller have painted an opposed picture. This paper is restricted to these thinkers the core discussion being collective intentionality. I have put forward arguments defending John R. Searle's irreducibility account. Searle has put forward his account of collective intentionality as biologically primitive which is not merely a culmination of individual intentionality.

**Keywords:** Social Ontology, Institutional Facts, Collective Intentionality, Status-Function.

Study of social ontology focuses on the idea of "the group". Ontology is the study of existence. An inquiry into what really exists as opposed to phantom<sup>1</sup>. But despite focusing on the existent, there are innumerable intricacies involved to this study. Most of the social ontology thinkers would agree to the point that the bone of contention to discuss social ontology would be the idea of the *group*. And indeed, many have tried to provide a perspicuous account for this fundamental element. One among these thinkers is American philosopher John R. Searle. His inquiry starts with the query- "How can there be an epistemically objective set of statements about a reality which is ontologically subjective?" (Searle, 2009, p.18). The term *epistemic objectivity* may raise eyebrows here since whilst talking about institutional facts objectivity cannot be comprehended. This is because the social reality I am dealing with is a constructed reality and objectivity can gravitate towards itself with serious criticism. The first of which being the possibility of such objectivity. This paper is an attempt to answer all such queries taking help from Searle. It is also an attempt to defend Searle's theory of group intention as a better theory of social reality for a stable institutional reality.

Every activity human beings perform is an intended activity. Intentionality has captured attention in the philosophical domain (especially philosophy of mind) for a long time. In this paper the concern is of social intentionality or as John Rogers Searle would term collective in-

tionality. But first the basics of intentionality need to be understood.

## Intentionality

Very simply defined, intentionality will be the directed mental states towards something. "...Intentionality is that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world." (Searle, 1983, p.1). He considered intentionality to be biological which functions in the same way as other biological activities like digestion. Intentionality is always about the mental states in human beings. However, Searle's theory of intentionality has some unique features which he elaborated in his work. The most important one is that he doesn't consider any and every mental state to be intentional. According to him there are certain mental states which could be undirected. And aboutness or directedness toward something is primordial to intentionality (Searle, 1983). Since like his theory of speech acts, the notion of *direction of fit* is also applied to intentionality<sup>2</sup>. The direction of fit is important to intentionality since only via this the conditions of satisfaction can be fulfilled. These conditions of satisfaction can be defined as those conditions in the world which need to be fulfilled for the satisfaction of the intentional state (Searle, 2009). Another important feature of intentionality is that intentionality is not the same as consciousness. This is because there are many conscious states which are not intentional. Like the undirected intentionality mentioned above. Another difference between them would be that consciousness and the experience of consciousness is the same. For instance, consciousness of elation and elation is equivalent. But the intentionality of fear of fire cannot be equal to fire (Searle, 1983).

In continuation to this analysis, Searle has also proceeded to scrutinize the structure of intentionality. He asserts that intentionality can be bifurcated into two distinct logical categories namely- *prior intention (PI)* and *intention-in-action (IA)*. As the name suggests, the former deals with intention before the action is performed. It can be said that PI is the formation of an intentional action that will be carried out in some time. For instance, I intend to drink water after twenty seconds. So, PI occurs before the intentional action is performed. On the contrary, IA happens along with the performance of the intended action. For instance, if I am drinking water now that will be considered to be IA (Searle, 2009). Action therefore will be that event of IA causing Bodily Movement. (Searle, 2009). These are the basic elements needed for understanding individual intentionality. For the present

discussion focus needs to be put on *collective intentionality* without which a discussion of social reality will not be possible.

### Collective Intentionality

Collective Intentionality is one of the building blocks of social ontology. Like certain other thinkers of social ontology, even Searle has acknowledged the fact that there cannot exist the “social”<sup>3</sup> without the “collective”<sup>4</sup>. However, Searle is responsible for a very unique take on this collective intentionality which will be the central topic of discussion in this paper. The form of individual intentionality was “I intend” in the first-person singular form. However, as it might seem that an aggregate of individual intentionality would lead to collective, it is not the case in Searle’s social ontology. An aggregate of individual intentionality resulting in a collective will be of the form:

I intend + I intend + I intend...along with mutual beliefs<sup>5</sup>

According to Searle, the form of collective intentionality is in the first-person plural form, that is it starts with *we-intend* in the individual minds rather than an aggregate of I-intends. Collective intentionality in Searle’s terminology is *biologically primitive*. The term, primitivity is considered to be something basic. Here since primitivity is biological, it needs to be present in all human beings. Thus, “we-intend” form is present in all individuals. But here a query may arise- Then why is there so much chaos in the society? The answer to this can be found in his analysis itself. He has never propagated a harmonious collectively intentioned society where there would be no chaos. There is freedom of choice in case of individuals to do or not to do an institutional activity. However, if the institutional activity is a matter of requirement (that is something involving violation of laws), not doing it will have its own consequences. By considering collective intentionality as biologically primitive, what Searle meant was that human beings have the *capacity* for collective intentionality. Being capacitated to possess the “we-intentionality” in individual heads does not entail loss of freedom or commitment. And just as there are individual prior intentions and intentions-in-actions, so also there are collective prior intentions and collective intentions-in-actions. While collectively indulging into an act requiring “the collective”, it may give the impression of the structure of an aggregate. The aggregate of intentionality would then be a reduction of the proposed “we-intend” by Searle. But Searle is against this reduction. To understand this reduction, it is important to refer to Raimo Tuomela and Kaarlo Miller’s paper *We-intentions* which I would be briefly stating.

### Reducing We-Intentions to I-intentions

Importance of we-intention is circumambient in the idea of collective intentions on account of the fact that there is something called *internalizing* the group intention. To instantiate, I may as part of an orchestra play the cello. But this playing as part will not suffice if I play according to

my own mood and desires without taking into consideration the importance of playing in the group. Of course, I may play according to my moods or desires but the result will not be a mellifluous group activity. Naturally working as per your own preference, the idea of the group would disrupt and there will not be the collective. To understand this internalization, Tuomela and Miller put forward their theory of collective intentionality. They focused on actions which are social in the sense that there is a conceptual presupposition of the existence of other agents along with various social institutions (Tuomela and Miller, 1988). The central claim they put forward in “We-intentions” is that “...all intentional joint actions will involve some relevant *we-attitudes*, viz. we-intentions and mutual beliefs plus the proattitudes underlying them.” (Tuomela and Miller, 1988, p. 370) Herein, the sociality is involved in the relevant we-attitudes. To illustrate- If I am playing the cello and someone else (say “X”) sitting next to me in the music room is playing the piano, it may so happen that a third person (say “Y”) can hear the “Beethoven Symphony No. 5”. “Y” may approach us and appreciate the Symphony. In this case we would be rather surprised about Y’s appreciation. X may even ardently reciprocate that we weren’t playing the aforementioned Symphony. Analysis of the above illustration reveals that I intended to play the cello part of the Symphony and accordingly “X” intended to perform the piano part but there was no mutual belief among both and thus this cannot be considered to be a collectively intentioned action. It can be deduced from the above analysis that intention expression of the form “We will do X” can be justified with individual intentions and mutual beliefs among the individually intentioned people. This seems to solve the problem of defining collective intentionality. However, Searle in his work *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* critiqued this analysis suggesting that mere mutual beliefs are not enough.

For two people, say X and Y, to possess *mutual beliefs* it needs to be the case that both are intended towards the same activity, say playing the same symphony, and each one involved knows that the other intends, and each knows that each knows that the other knows that, and so on (Searle, 2009). What Searle here has offered is that instead of this proposed reduction to I intention, it can be the case that each individual has “we-intend” in their heads without the need of mutual belief. Furthermore, by providing a counterexample he suggests that the proposed reduction fails. In the example Searle put forward the *invisible hand* theory put forward by Adam Smith. In it a group of Harvard Business school graduates believing the invisible hand theory goes out by acting as selfish as they can in order to benefit humanity. Now here each one knows that the other has intended the same thing and so there is mutual belief but this according to Searle is not collective intentionality. This is because there is no *pact* or *promise* involved. Thus, without a pact there would be no implied obligation among the members to continue working along the same line (Searle, 2009). This is an important factor due to which I favour Searle’s theory more than the reductionist theory of collective intentionality. Searle’s theory emerges at the very root of institutional facts which recognizes assigning function to objects as

one of the basic building blocks. These come with a myriad of other factors, applying *status functions* being one of the most pivotal. In the next sections I have analysed the strands of few such factors of social reality in order to defend primitive collective intentionality as a better thesis.

### The Evolution

The need for institutional fact arose based on human requirement. To come out of a society that was chaotic and proceed to something which depended on certain principles. However, institutions are not always visible to us as apparent. Even institutions like money which is in constant use have the tendency to lose its focus from daily life. This is because money as an institution has chameleoned into what Searle calls *the background*<sup>6</sup>. It is evident that the money which we use now has undergone a lot of changes over the years. Earlier the usage of money which was transaction of goods and services happened in a different mode; say the barter system. The barter system helped exchange things with the use of any other thing having the same value. Even gold coins were used immensely at one point. However, soon the value of the same amount has been put into papers due to convenience purposes. This shows how institutions come into being then gets evolved with human development. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the *germ of intention* to submit to such created institutions is within every human being. Now when it comes to institutions, the focus is on the group. And it can be seen that the group indeed contributes for the creation and development of institutions with the passing of time. This is the reason why intentionality is considered to be biological and collective intentionality is defined as *irreducibly biologically primitive*. Thus, the non-reductionist theory of Searle.

The collective intentionality helps forming institutional facts by applying collectively acknowledged rules to objects around us. These rules are termed as constitutive rules as opposed to regulative rules. Regulative rules merely regulate the antecedent existing activities. For instance, the rule of walking on the left-hand side of the road. Even if I do not walk on the left-hand side, walking would still exist. But constitutive rules equate the activity itself. That is without constitutive rules the activity say of the game of chess will cease to exist (Searle, 1995). The structure of such rules is expressed in the form:

“X counts as Y” or “X counts as Y in context C” (Searle, 1995, p. 28).

The X term in the above formula will analyse further the assignment of function criteria of social reality. The assignment of function Searle considers is another capacity of human beings. As we grow up, we are surrounded by a lot of things, some created by us and some objective already existing entities. These objects are created and named with the purpose of serving our needs and desires. Having a function imposed on an object is called “agentive functions”. (Searle, 2009) Functions are imposed for it to be useful for our own purposes. However, these impositions are not restricted to humans as animals too use

objects for specific purposes like building a nest out of twigs. Herein the distinction between *intrinsic* and *observer-relative* features of the world can be seen as put out by Searle. This differentiation is vivid when we realise the purpose of an object (for instance- a chair is used to sit on) as opposed to what is the material composition of the object (like molecules packed together, mass of wood etc). The former is observer or intentionality relative whereas the latter features are intrinsic (Searle, 1995). Searle's main concern is however a special class of function known as the *status function* which can be arrived at by collective intentionality. These are special sets of functions which contribute to the creation and maintenance of institutional facts. In the above formula, the term Y denotes these functions. The object X is being imposed on a certain special status function Y in a specific context. To instantiate, the status function of money is being imposed on certain types of papers in the context of transaction of goods. Now there are specific criteria for the status function imposed on objects, the most pivotal being that only collective intentionality can help achieve the desired goal of status functions. Mere one person imposing a status cannot lead to an institutional fact. There need to be collective acknowledgement and recognition to attain that status. But queries may come as to why institutions were at all necessary? Is it not curbing individual freedom? For I cannot walk around lifting things from shops and staying wherever I wish to with no property ownership ideas. Why did institutions come into existence in the first place? It cannot be denied that institutions exist, and we are surrounded by it. We just stop noticing already prevailing institutions because we have become used to the fact that these exist (because of the background). That chair is used to sit on, that money is used to buy things with, that my purpose of university education is to attain a specific degree and so on and so forth.

Institutions no doubt create a harmonious system to be lived within. Due to the human tendency to be biologically intentioned, one cannot deny that we are social beings. Although there is a whole another debate going on as to what is more important the individual or the social, I in no way think that the individual importance is lost with putting immense importance to the formation of a society. However, I would not get into this debate as it is not required for the current paper. I do want to put it outright that there is individual freedom even in an institutionalised society since there is always a possibility of choice whether to perform an institutionalised practice. But these choices come with their own negative consequence. For instance, I may choose to not submit my PhD thesis in the registered university within the timeframe given, but as a result I will not be provided the degree and might have to return the scholarships I have got so far. Now going back to the original question, institutions are necessary to harmoniously sustain in the society as there are others belonging to the human kind. Formation of these institutions help sustain a power to survive through and with the others. Without this power requirement, living with other people is impossible owing to the chaos there would be. Institutional powers give structure to the society and this runs through every institution there is. Power restricts the others' choice and also my choice. If it is someone's in-

tention to shoplift items from a store, the legal power restricts the individual's intention to do so. Similarly, if it is my intention to use the university's resources and not do my work, the university has the power over me to restrict my time in the campus. Searle has mentioned two forms of uncodified power, which runs through every sane person's mind and helps maintain societal power. They are known as the Background Power and the Network Power.

"...the Background consists of the set of capacities, dispositions, tendencies, practices, and so on that enable the intentionality to function, and the Network of intentionality consists of the set of beliefs, attitudes, desires, and so on that enable specific intentional states to function." (Searle, 2009, p. 155).

It cannot be denied that the societal institutions and people residing within it have power over us. The Background Power exhibits this kind of power. This shows how society controls individual actions with regard to the clothes worn, how one behaves towards another or how one uses institutions like money without question. It is not an apparent power of having control. But it is an unconscious power that has its root in every individual residing in society. On account of this every individual is entitled to demand certain acts in their favour and curb their own freedom in retrospect. Such a case can also be seen in Margaret Gilbert's paper *Walking Together: A Paradigmatic Social Phenomena*. In this paper, Gilbert has taken the example of something as simple as walking. Now walking is an uncodified activity but surely a social activity<sup>7</sup>. If walking is done together, there are certain unconscious principles that go on through the activity. Even though uncodified, there is a certain expectation of each member walking together within a group from the other members. The most obvious being that each one is expected to walk together. And if one walks faster than the others there is the possibility of rebuke by the ones left behind. That is there is entitlement going on in such a simple case of collectively intentioned activity. Gilbert calls this phenomenon *plural subjecthood*, wherein "...each of the number of persons (two or more) has, in effect, offered his will to be part of a pool of wills which is dedicated, as one, to that goal" (Gilbert, 1990, p.7). Now the question is, at what point of the activity did this right of one person over the other enter? Here it can be seen that there is a general understanding that entails the fact wherein if two people enter into the activity of walking together, they have certain entitlement or obligation within the activity. Now, this particular notion can be extended to Searle when he talks about obligation or a pact (mentioned earlier in Adam Smith's invisible hand theory) when there is collective intentionality. Also, the specific type of collective intentionality of Searle can be justified here taking help from Gilbert's idea of entitlement.

## Conclusion

Primitive collective intentionality has been a moot point among social ontologists. Despite the opposed picture painted by Tuomela and Miller, I choose to defend the primitive collective intentionality due to certain specific traits of institutional fact mentioned above. Institutional

facts can be seen to be of two categories. The first category is such that which requires an officiation by means of language. Language comes at the apex in the formation of any kind of institutional fact. Be it a certain specific language of alphabets we use or certain signs used especially during games say score maintenance. The main point here is that in order for an institution to be social it definitely needs to be communicative within the social arena. Now there are also certain institutional facts which do not require any type of officiation.<sup>8</sup> But is just carried out with an understanding among the members. Examples of such would be friendship, parties or the case of walking together as mentioned above. For sustenance of any such facts one thing which is indeed necessary is that the people involved have a sense of responsibility towards it. Not the type of responsibility where the fact is carried forward without hesitation but there at least need to be the idea or awareness of consequences that will follow if the institutions aren't followed. Thus, if it is the case that the "we-intentionality" is easily reduced to "I-intentionality", mere mutual belief among the agents will not be enough to carry forward the institution since there is the possibility of some agents backing off. Here the power that is being succinctly discussed can be referred to. The structure of power apart from some providing a harmonious and non-chaotic image of a society, also gives rise to obligation and in turn responsibilities. A pact created or an entitlement provided to rebuke the other or use certain power against the other will set specific patterns upon the other to follow the we-intentionality. This I think is not only important but necessary for maintaining an institution. Now it cannot be denied that the capacity to collectively engage in an activity is within each one of us since we live in an "I-we" society. Without this capacity the understanding of collective intentionality as primitive will not arise. Searle has provided a rather distinctive take analysing the collective intentionality of the individuals. The understanding of "we-intentionality" in such a way helps build a coherent system of institutional facts. The reality of institutional facts is a constructed reality. This construction is in every individual mind and therefore ontologically subjective. However, despite being ontologically subjective, there is an epistemic objectivity of these facts. This is because such facts run through society. It may differ in different communities but it indeed is carried forward by a group of individuals mostly unquestionably. This fact can be carried forward only pertaining to the primitive collective intentionality in every individual mind. The *we-intentionality* helps maintain the epistemic objectivity of such constructed intentional facts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I used the term phantom here to suggest something that does not contribute to the constitution of ontology. There are thinkers like Markus Gabriel who belongs to the trend of New Realism. His theory of ontology included everything that could be possibly thought about subjectively along with the objective entities.

<sup>2</sup> The notion of *direction of fit* is followed by the conditions of satisfaction either in the propositional content or the intentionality. For instance, assertives have word to the world direction of fit because they match the independently existing world. Similarly, belief statements have a mind to the world direction of fit because the belief is about something in the world and accordingly the belief is either true or false.

<sup>3</sup> By “the social” I only refer to a fully-fledged society wherein institutional facts are run and maintained by groups.

<sup>4</sup> Collective can be referred to be more than one. In terms of institutional facts, the idea of the collective varies. In the sense that the type of action I am committed to will determine the quantity of people involved in the collective. To instantiate, carrying a piano upstairs will require two or three people. However, for the institution of money innumerable human beings are involved throughout the globe.

<sup>5</sup> The mutual belief theory along with aggregate individual intentionalities was put forward by Raimo Tuomela and Kaarlo Miller. (See their paper “We-intentions”).

<sup>6</sup> Background capacities for Searle are pre-intentional. There need to be certain Background capacities for intentional states to function. These capacities enable intentional states. It may be walking, talking and other neuro-physiological activities.

<sup>7</sup> Searle considers any kind of activity involving collective intentionality a social fact. Institutional facts are a special subclass of social facts involving human institutions.

<sup>8</sup> I am using the term “officiation” here as a legal matter. Say if I create counterfeit money legally the state has the right to run a case against me.